

New directions in clergy psychological profiling: Connections with church growth?

Leslie J Francis*

University of Warwick, UK

Author note:

*Corresponding author:

Leslie J Francis

Warwick Religions & Education Research Unit

Centre for Education Studies

The University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)24 7652 2539

Fax: +44 (0)24 7657 2638

Email: leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

The Church Growth Research Programme reported a significant link between the psychological type profile of the senior cleric and patterns of church growth and decline. The present paper examines the implications of this finding from the perspectives of personality psychology, Christian theology, and church practice.

Keywords: psychology of religion, theology of individual difference, church growth, psychological type, clergy studies.

Introduction

The 2015 meeting of the Church of England's now annual conference on Faith in Research invited comments on the under-reported finding from the church-sponsored Church Growth Research Programme that the psychological type profile of the senior cleric offered a significant predictor of numerical growth in Anglican churches. The finding was reported by David Voas and Laura Watt in their report on *Numerical change in church attendance: National, local and individual factors*¹. They wrote that 'there are strong associations between growth and personality type, but none between growth and attendance on leadership courses' (p. 50). A similar point was made on p. 31.

There are two particularly surprising features about this finding. The first feature is that David Voas' work is generally located within the sociology of religion and sociologists of religion are not noted for employing or promoting psychological theories. The second feature is that this particular finding, although voiced twice in Voas' report, did not make its way into the public summary of key findings from the Church Growth Research Programme published as *From anecdote to evidence*².

There may be good reasons for this finding being overlooked. Psychological type theory comprises a field of study that has been challenged both by theologians and by psychologists. The aim of the present study is to clarify the claims of psychological type theory, to examine the theological rationale for taking psychological type theory seriously within a church-related context, to examine the strength of the case for psychological type theory alongside other models of personality, to review the wider research evidence linking the psychological type profile of church leaders with church growth, and to explore the implications of the findings for church leadership.

Clarifying psychological type theory

Psychological type theory offers a model of personality (a psychology of individual difference) that is grounded in a theory of human psychological functioning. The theory is rooted in the observations of Carl Jung³ and expanded and clarified by a series of psychological assessment tools, including the Myers Briggs Type Indicator⁴, the Keirsey Temperament Sorter⁵ and the Francis Psychological Type Scales⁶. The theory differentiates between two core psychological processes, the perceiving process concerned with gathering information (called the irrational process because there is no evaluation involved) and the judging process concerned with evaluating information (called the rational process). The theory maintains that each process is expressed through two contrasting functions. Perceiving is expressed through sensing (a concern for facts) and through intuition (a concern for ideas). Judging is expressed through thinking (evaluation on the basis of objective logical analysis) and feeling (evaluation on the basis of subjective personal and interpersonal values). While all four functions are required for optimal human functioning, individuals tend to prefer (and hence develop) one of the two perceiving functions and one of the two judging functions over the other.

In addition to the two core processes, the theory also proposes the idea of orientation and attitude. Orientation is concerned with the source of psychological energy and distinguishes between introverts who draw their energy from the inner world and extraverts who draw their energy from the outer world. Attitude is concerned with the approach taken to the outer world and distinguishes between judging types who employ thinking or feeling in the outer world to create an organised approach to life, and perceiving types who employ sensing or intuition in the outer world to create a flexible approach to life.

Psychological type profiling enables individuals to voice their preferences between introversion (I) and extraversion (E), between sensing (S) and intuition (N), between thinking (T) and feeling (F), and between judging (J) and perceiving (P). The present author, for

example, reports as INTJ. Psychological type theory seems, therefore, to offer a coherent and interesting account of mental functioning.

Engaging with theology

The major objections raised by theologians against psychological type theory go like this. The classification of individuals within discrete psychological types underestimates the infinite variety of human individuality and undervalues the power of God to recreate and to transform individuals. The grounds underpinning the first of these objections can be challenged by the principles informing the approach of empirical theology. The grounds underpinning the second of these objections can be challenged by the principles informing the approach of the theology of individual difference.

Empirical theology has its recent roots in the work of Hans van der Ven in Nijmegen⁷, Hans-Georg Ziebertz in Wurzburg⁸, and my work in Warwick⁹, but its more ancient roots are in the work of Jesus of Nazareth. When his listeners asked Jesus to teach them about the Reign of God, invariably Jesus invited them to go and to observe the natural world. They became empirical theologians by engaging with the natural sciences as exemplified by studying the growth of seeds, or the activity of yeast. They became empirical theologians by engaging with the social sciences as exemplified by studying the behaviour of guests at the wedding feast or observing the behaviour of maidens awaiting the bridegroom. The point is that there are patterns in the world that God creates, both the natural world and the human world, and patterns are to be expected in the Reign of God within the natural world and among God's people. Psychological type theory emerges precisely from such disciplined observation.

The theology of individual differences has its roots in my work with Andrew Village¹⁰ as we take seriously the insights into what it means to be human afforded by the network of classic Christian doctrines. The theology of individual differences is rooted in a

strong doctrine of creation drawing on Genesis 1: 27. According to this account, God created both male and female in the image of God. Here individual difference is built into the intentionality of the divine creator. Sex difference cannot be attributed to the corruption of the fall. Sex difference is not something we may readily expect God to override or to change.

The task of the theology of individual differences is to test whether other human differences, like sex difference, may be securely rooted in the doctrine of creation rather than in the doctrine of the fall. Ethnic difference is a strong candidate. If men and women are equally created in the image of the God who embraces diversity, it is not unreasonable to posit that white and black are equally created in the image of God who embraces diversity. Then what is not corrupted by the fall may not seek the saving grace of Christ to transform, restore and change.

The theology of individual differences then posits that some fundamental psychological differences, like sex differences and ethnic differences, may be securely rooted in the doctrine of creation. It is at this point that clear thinking is needed to discern the confusion that exists in the way in which psychologists define and interpret personality. The notion of personality may be used by psychologists to conflate three very different notions that are better distinguished by the three concepts of character, psychopathology and psychological type. Character refers to those qualities, like pride and humility, over which individuals may have some control. Here are qualities properly located within the doctrines of fall and redemption. The Christian disciple is challenged to repent of the fruits of the flesh and to embrace the fruits of the spirit. Here are real signs of the transformatory power of the Gospel over human character. Psychopathology refers to qualities of psychological sickness, like neurotic disorders and psychotic disorders, from which therapeutic healing is properly sought, in both secular and spiritual approaches. Here the saving grace of Christ may again be seen at work in promoting psychological health and in ameliorating psychological sickness.

Psychological type, on the other hand, may tap those deep seated human differences that reflect the intentionality of the divine creator. It may be as theologically inappropriate to seek God's grace to transform introverts into extraverts, or to transform women into men, or black faces into white faces, or *vice versa*. In this way the theology of individual differences clarifies areas of potential confusion within contemporary personality theory by drawing on insights that theology brings to an understanding of what it means to be human, as seen in light of the classic doctrines of creation, fall, and redemption.

In summary, alongside theological objections raised against psychological type theory, there seems to be a sound theological case for continuing to work with the theory within a church-related context.

Engaging with psychology

The major objections raised by psychologists against psychological type theory go like this. Unlike other major personality theories, psychological type theory did not emerge from the reduction of quantitative data; unlike other major personality theories, psychological type theory conceptualises individual differences in terms of discrete types rather than locations on continua; tools designed to measure psychological type have been subjected to less scientific scrutiny than is the case with other recognised personality measures. A twenty-year programme of research, now reflected in three recent special issues of scientific journals, has begun to erode the power of these objections¹¹.

It is true that other major models of personality, like those proposed by Cattell¹², Eysenck¹³, and Costa and McCrae¹⁴ have begun from a factor analysis of variance in a broad range of individual differences, but it is also a fact that these three models fail to agree on the factor solution. Eysenck proposes three factors, Costa and McCrae propose five factors, and Cattell settles for 16 factors. Statistically the objectivity of the exercise can be disputed, while conceptually it is recognised that what emerges from factor analysis is shaped by the

variables that are entered into the analysis. Conceptually, Cattell includes measures of ability while Eysenck does not do so. Psychological type theory at least begins from a clear conceptual model concerning those aspects of mental functioning that are to be included and those aspects that are not to be included.

It is true that the other major models of personality are designed to locate individuals on continua (without, for example, specifying the point on the continuum at which introversion is distinguished from extraversion), while psychological type theory claims to be able to assign individuals to categories (in this case either introversion *or* extraversion). Adjudication between the merits of the continua approach and the typology approach is an ongoing matter for scientific investigation, but both approaches have been shown to have predictive power.

It is true that there is a more extensive scientific literature on the reliability and validity of some measures of personality than others, largely as a consequence of the preferences of the research psychologists publishing in the field. The scientific literature in the field of the measurement of psychological type theory is well on the way to catching up and now provides a solid foundation on which to build¹⁵.

In summary, alongside psychological objections raised against psychological type theory, there seems to be a sound psychological case for continuing to work with the theory within a church-related context.

Engaging with the evidence

The first step in engaging with the evidence is to be clear about the precise scientific claims being made by Voas and Watt in their paper. The claims are based on data from an on-line survey emailed to clergy. From an effective sample of 3,735, there were 1,703 responses of which 1,458 were complete (an effective response rate of 39%). Psychological type was assessed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales. The data generated by this instrument

were employed in different analyses both as continuous scale scores and as dichotomous type categories. Growth was assessed both as an objective measure (drawing on available church statistics) and as a subjective measure (drawing on self-report). Both measures have acknowledged weaknesses.

Using continuous scale scores Voas and Watt reported positive correlations between church growth and extraversion for both the subjective measure and the objective measure, and between church growth and intuition for both the subjective measure and the objective measure. No significant correlations were reported between church growth (on either measure) and the scales measuring thinking and feeling or the scales measuring judging and perceiving.

Using the dichotomous type categories, Voas and Watt reported that the combination of extraversion and intuition served as a particularly effective predictor of church growth. While 10% of clergy who preferred introversion and sensing reported substantial church growth, the proportion rose to 31% of clergy who preferred extraversion and intuition. While 30% of clergy who preferred introversion and sensing reported church decline, the proportion fell to 15% of clergy who preferred extraversion and intuition. Voas and Watt concluded

To put it another way, I-S clergy among our respondents are three times as likely to preside over decline as substantial growth; E-N clergy are twice as likely to experience substantial growth as decline. (p. 56)

While the evidence published by Voas and Watt seems quite clear, scientific research cannot rest content with the results from a single study. A second study, drawing on data from a very different source adds some weight to the findings from England. As part of the series of studies emanating from the Australian National Church Life Survey, Kaldor and McLean¹⁶ also reported on the connection between church growth and the psychological type

profile of the senior church leader as assessed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales.

Their conclusions are as follows:

Churches that are growing numerically or where there is an owned vision for the future are more likely to be led by leaders who are extraverted, intuitive and, to a lesser extent, with a perceiving approach to the world. This profile is the opposite to the most common personality type among church leaders. (p. 151)

Unfortunately Kaldor and McLean reported their conclusion without documenting the scientific evidence underpinning that conclusion.

A third pilot study reported by Francis, Ratter and Longden¹⁷ also came to similar conclusions, drawing on a 50% response rate from clergy within one Church of England Diocese who completed the Francis Psychological Type Scales. This study focused only on clergy who had served the same church for at least five years and compared the psychological type continuous scale scores of 29 clergy whose congregations had declined over the past six years with 19 clergy whose congregations had grown over that period. The clergy leading growing churches recorded higher extraversion scores, higher intuition scores, and significantly higher perceiving scores. Significance levels in the study are vulnerable to the small number of cases involved.

Exploring the implications

The findings that churches may be more likely to grow (in the sense of increasing congregational numbers) when led by extraverts, intuitive types, and perceiving types makes good sense within the context of type theory. Churches are by their very nature social units, and extraverts are more adept than introverts at social engagement. It makes sense that extraverts may be better at drawing new people into membership. Churches may require vision and imagination to seize new opportunities that may promote and inspire growth, and intuitive types are more adept than sensing types at spotting connections and shaping

inspiring visions. It makes sense that intuitive types may be better at breaking new ground to inspire others. A major difficulty faced by growing churches concerns the disruption to routine that may be caused by new people bringing their own ideas, skills and visions into an established community. Perceiving types are more adept than judging types at responding to new and changing opportunities. It makes sense that perceiving types may be better adapting and shaping congregations to embrace new people.

A better understanding of the connection between church growth and the psychological type profile of church leaders may offer the Church informed opportunities to deploy its clergy more effectively, but it would need to use this information intelligently. Two particular issues are worth closer scrutiny, concerning the selection and deployment of clergy, particularly in relation to the two orientations (introversion and extraversion) and to the two attitudes to the outer world (judging and perceiving).

First, in terms of selection, current data on the psychological type profile of Anglican clergy in England¹⁸ suggest that disproportionate numbers of introverts and judging types are selected into ordained ministry, characteristics associated with church decline rather than church growth. What is not known is whether this is a consequence of fewer extraverts and fewer perceiving types presenting themselves for selection or a consequence of extraverts and perceiving types being less likely to survive the selection process. If the selectors were themselves representative of the current profile of clergy (introverts and judging types), it is conceivable that they may be less likely to see vocational calling within extraverts and perceiving types.

Second, in terms of deployment, it would be a mistake to imagine that the recipe for church growth is simply to appoint extravert, intuitive, perceiving types into senior leadership positions without careful reflection. The data simply suggest that these type characteristics are associated with numerical growth. Other type characteristics may be associated with other

signs of growth in spiritual maturity, or growth in disciplined personal holiness. Moreover, extravert, intuitive, perceiving types placed in significant leadership roles may need significant support from other types to be effective leaders. Extravert leaders may need to be supported by introvert colleagues to deal with many of the tasks of ministry that rely on skills associated with introversion, like one-on-one counselling and leadership in quiet reflective spiritual practices. Intuitive type leaders may need to be supported by sensing type colleagues who have a keen eye for practical details that need proper attention, like finance and buildings. Perceiving type leaders may need to be supported by judging type colleagues who have a keen sense of responsibility for structure and discipline, like ensuring that things are well planned in advance and that proper facilities are in place.

Further research is needed to document more fully the connection between psychological type characteristics and both the selection process and the experience of active ministry.

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